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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1277
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1846
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: THE FEMALE "STREET NINJAS" OF ASHGABAT

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Every day, an army of Turkmen women, in bright orange traffic vests and with their heads and faces wrapped in scarves, descend on the capital's streets and public sites to carefully sweep away Ashgabat's omnipresent dust with handmade brooms. These "street ninjas," who work on traffic-laden streets in all weather conditions, are among Turkmenistan's lowest-paid laborers, hired primarily because they are cheaper than maintaining expensive street-cleaning equipment. Finding a ready labor force because of Turkmenistan's poverty and high unemployment rate, these jobs have become a sort of make-work program for these women, who are among Turkmenistan's most disadvantaged citizens. END SUMMARY.

KEEPING THE WHITE-MARBLE CAPITAL PRISTINE

3. (SBU) Every day, a multitude of Turkmen women in orange traffic vests turn out to sweep away dust all year, leaves in the fall, and even a quarter inch of snow in the winter from the streets in front of Ashgabat's domed government palaces, around fountains, and along the six-lane boulevards. Local people call them "Turkmen ninjas" because most wrap their heads and faces in scarves, leaving only their eyes uncovered. While the majority of women use the cover to protect their faces from sun and their lungs from dust, some do this so as not to be seen doing one of Turkmenistan's dirtiest, most menial jobs. It is the job of Turkmenistan's "street ninjas" to ensure that white-marble Ashgabat remains pristine. Their mission: to ensure that Turkmenistanis walk through the "Golden Age of Turkmen" on clean streets.

"STREET NINJAS" INSTEAD OF STREET-CLEANING EQUIPMENT

4. (SBU) To meet the government's requirements for the city beautification program, the Ashgabat mayor's office purchased some expensive street-cleaning machines from abroad, which are used mainly for streets lay along the president's daily travel routes. However, the department continues to favor hiring "street ninjas" over purchasing expensive equipment. In the past two years, the department doubled the number of "street ninjas" to about 1,000 and increased their salary from 1 million manat (\$50) to 1.5 million manat (\$75) per month. (NOTE: The average monthly wage in Turkmenistan according to official statistics is 2.8 million manat,

or \$140. END NOTE.) All the cleaning is done with hand-made brooms, which the street cleaners have to buy at their own expense.

15. (SBU) The sweepers are women of all ages, including some who are elderly, as well as teen-age girls just out of high school. Whatever the weather, they work 12 hours a day (from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.), with one day off a week. On evenings before the president's inspection trips around the city, the "street ninjas" work until midnight. The employer does not provide them with special seasonal clothing, nor does it guarantee workplace safety. Five years ago two street cleaners were killed in car accidents while cleaning mud from an Ashgabat tunnel.

WHO ARE THE WOMEN? UNEDUCATED AND POOR

16. (SBU) Locals observers have commented that this is not work that traditionally has been considered suitable for women. (Traditionally, Turkmen women, especially young women with babies and small children, have been carefully protected from anything that was associated with dirt.) However, during the Niyazov era, high unemployment and a growing drug addiction rate left many Turkmen males unable to support their families. Desperate to feed their families, Turkmen women turned to street sweeping. These women, in general, are viewed with pity by society, which sees them as victims of the growing drug trade -- and of the government's failure to undertake meaningful social reforms.

17. (SBU) The majority of the women are uneducated and from the lowest income levels. They include single mothers, women with multiple children whose husbands are unemployed, and elderly women ineligible for pensions and who do not have other sources of income or families to help support them. Some women take this job to supplement their families' meager income. The relative of one

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embassy FSN who lives in a low-income community not far from the Tolkuchka market in the far northern part of the city confirmed that about 20 women in her neighborhood alone serve as street sweepers.

18. (SBU) Although the majority of "street ninjas" are from Ashgabat because this job requires an Ashgabat residency permit, good connections with the hiring office and a bribe can open a slot for a person without a residency permit. For example, one woman, who moved with her husband and two children from Dashoguz to Ashgabat five years ago and who does not have an Ashgabat residency permit, received the job by paying a \$50 bribe. Her husband, who also does not have a residency permit, works for a Turkish construction firm and earns \$100/month. The family lives in a mud hut on a relative's dacha property 15 kilometers outside the city. Whenever local police raid the dacha to clear out unauthorized migrants (this happens every three months), the family has to bribe the district police officer. The minimum bribe for a person in this case is 100,000 manat or \$5. As a result of these difficulties, there are very few "street ninjas" from outside Ashgabat.

THE LOWEST BRIBE IN THE STATE LABOR MARKET

19. (SBU) To get a "street ninja" job requires a one-time bribe of \$50, the cheapest bribe by the local labor market standards. Upon getting the job, the sweeper frequently pays the bribe from his/her first paycheck. By comparison, any other job in the state sector requires a bribe of \$100 to \$1,000, depending on the job. One Ashgabat resident said she was asked to pay a \$100 bribe to get a janitorial job at a state enterprise. A resident of Mary province paid \$200 to get a job at a joint-venture textile factory run by a Turkish firm. An Ashgabat teacher was asked to pay a \$1,000 bribe to a city education department official for promotion to the position of deputy principal in her school.

"SOCIALLY USEFUL LABOR"

110. (SBU) While "street ninjas" are the major force behind Turkmenistan's cleanliness, street cleaning is also part of any government employment contract. "Participation in socially useful labor" -- street cleaning and tree planting during week-ends, and

seat filling at government-organized public events -- is an important condition for retaining a job in a state sector. Refusal to participate in "socially useful labor" usually results in dismissal.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: Turkmenistan's poverty and high unemployment rate have made it relatively easy for the government to find a ready, cheap labor force. For women, who are socially and physically ill-suited for low-paid jobs in the construction industry, these "city beautification" jobs have become a sort of make-work program. But, as in many other areas, the government has not addressed the economic and social roots of the poverty that leave the "street ninjas" among the country's most disadvantaged citizens. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND